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IN THE COURT OF APPEAL OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

FIRST APPELLATE DISTRICT

DIVISION THREE

VIROLOGIC, INC.,

Plaintiff and Appellant,

V.

DOE,

Defendants and Respondents.

A101571 A102811

(San Francisco County Super. Ct. No. CGC-02-407068)

After an anonymous person (Doe) posted inflammatory messages on an Internet bulletin board, biotechnology company ViroLogic Inc. (ViroLogic) filed suit and sought to discover the identity of the poster. While allowing limited discovery, including a deposition of Doe, the trial court denied the request of ViroLogic's attorneys to disclose Doe's identity to the company. The court also granted Doe's special motion to strike

Due to the confidential nature of the alleged trade secrets, and the poster's identity, much of the record in this case was filed under seal in the trial court pursuant to a stipulated protective order. On appeal, both parties sought permission to file their briefs under seal, and ViroLogic asked us to seal portions of the appellant's appendix and reporter's transcript. Recognizing the court has a statutory duty to preserve the secrecy of an alleged trade secret (Civ. Code, § 3426.5; *In re Providian Credit Card Cases* (2002) 96 Cal.App.4th 292, 297-300), we granted the motions and allowed the parties to file confidential versions of their briefs under seal. It is, of course, impossible for this court to file a confidential or sealed opinion; however, we endeavor to discuss the relevant facts in sufficiently general terms to maintain their confidentiality.

ViroLogic's complaint under the anti-SLAPP statute. (Code Civ. Proc., § 425.16, subd. (b)(1).)² ViroLogic challenges these rulings on appeal.

Without reaching the merits of the ruling on the special motion to strike, we conclude the judgment must be reversed because the trial court erred in preventing ViroLogic's attorneys from sharing Doe's identity with their client. We hold that a motion to discover the identity of an anonymous speaker requires the trial court to balance the First Amendment rights of the speaker against the moving party's due process right to obtain necessary discovery to adequately pursue its legal claims. In exercising its discretion to grant or deny such discovery, the court should consider whether: (1) discovery of the speaker's identity is necessary for the moving party to prosecute its claims or defend against a motion to strike; and (2) claims the moving party has brought, or may potentially bring, against an anonymous speaker are legitimate and supported by good faith. Under the facts of this case, we conclude the trial court abused its discretion in denying such discovery to ViroLogic. We therefore reverse the judgment, with directions that the trial court vacate its order on Doe's special motion to strike and enter an order granting the motion of ViroLogic's counsel to disclose Doe's identity to the company.³ We express no opinion on the merits of the special motion to strike, which may be heard anew after ViroLogic has an opportunity to prepare a supplemental response.

All statutory references are to the Code of Civil Procedure unless otherwise stated. "SLAPP is an acronym for Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation. SLAPP litigation, generally, is litigation without merit filed to dissuade or punish the exercise of First Amendment rights of defendants. [Citations.]" (*Lafayette Morehouse, Inc. v. Chronicle Publishing Co.* (1995) 37 Cal.App.4th 855, 858.)

In a separate appeal consolidated with its appeal from the judgment, ViroLogic challenged a subsequent order awarding Doe reasonable attorneys fees and costs, pursuant to section 425.16, subdivision (c), in the amount of \$112,600. Because we are vacating the order on Doe's special motion to strike, it follows the award of reasonable attorneys fees and costs to Doe must also be vacated.

BACKGROUND

A. The Complaint

ViroLogic is a publicly traded biotechnology company. On April 23, 2002, ViroLogic filed a complaint against "Does 1 through 10" for misappropriation of trade secrets, defamation, trade libel, unfair competition and intentional interference with prospective economic advantage. Without identifying any allegedly actionable statements, ViroLogic claimed the defendants, using aliases, had published the company's confidential and proprietary trade secret information on an Internet message board maintained by Yahoo!, Inc (Yahoo). The complaint also alleged the Doe defendants had posted false and defamatory statements about "the business operations, products, services, and finances of ViroLogic and its officers and directors."

The following week, ViroLogic sought permission from the trial court to pursue expedited discovery from Yahoo as to the identity of the anonymous posters who had allegedly published defamatory statements and trade secret information. In support of this motion, ViroLogic's counsel submitted printouts of several posted messages the company considered objectionable. All of the messages were posted by an individual identified only as "billyyoungwont" on a Yahoo! Finance message board devoted to discussion of ViroLogic. Most of the messages insulted the business skills and personal appearance of certain managers and corporate officers, including chief executive officer William Young. Three messages asked if "anyone else" who visited the message board had heard "rumor[s]" about certain potential business events. The court granted the motion, and ViroLogic served subpoenas on Yahoo to determine the identity of "billyyoungwont," as well as posters "vlgcsucks" and "testingtesting1."

On May 16, 2002, ViroLogic filed an amended complaint, limiting its claims to misappropriation of trade secrets and unfair competition. Once again, ViroLogic did not describe the allegedly actionable statements published by the Doe defendants. Eventually, however, ViroLogic served under seal a statement of trade secrets in accordance with section 2019, subdivision (d). ViroLogic initially identified the trade secrets at issue in the action as: (1) confidential information concerning the company's

business operations, including proposed business arrangements with third parties, and financial strategies; and (2) nonpublic information concerning employees' sexual or lifestyle preferences and personal habits. However, ViroLogic later served an amended statement rescinding its claim regarding the second category and adding a claim of trade secret protection for "internal, as yet nonpublic financial information"

B. The Special Motion to Strike and Discovery Motions

Having retained counsel, Doe, otherwise known as "billyyoungwont," filed a special motion to strike the complaint pursuant to section 425.16, subdivision (b)(1).⁴ Doe argued the billyyoungwont messages were constitutionally protected anonymous speech about an issue of public concern and ViroLogic's "boilerplate" complaint presented "a perfect example of the type of lawsuit" the anti-SLAPP statute "intended to discourage."

In response, ViroLogic first filed a motion for discovery pursuant to section 425.16, subdivision (g), seeking a "very limited and focused deposition of billyyoungwont" to discover his identity, aliases and relationship to the company. In support of the motion, ViroLogic's vice president and general counsel Kathy Hibbs submitted a declaration describing several messages posted on the Yahoo message board in February and April 2002 that she and other officers came to suspect were written by someone with access to inside information about the company. After quoting several messages that maligned the personal appearance and sexual preferences of certain corporate officers, Hibbs described the activities ViroLogic undertook in secret in March 2002 to pursue a potential business partnership. According to Hibbs, on April 9, 2002, CEO Young sent an email message to an executive at another company regarding this potential relationship. The next day, messages began appearing on the Yahoo board from "billyyoungwont," "testingtesting1" and "vlgcsucks" referring to an alleged "rumor"

In conjunction with this motion, Doe also demurred to the amended complaint and moved to quash the subpoenas to Yahoo. The trial court ultimately denied these motions as moot after granting the special motion to strike.

about a potential relationship between ViroLogic and the same company Young had just contacted.

The court granted ViroLogic's discovery motion in part, allowing the company to take Doe's deposition on topics identified in the moving papers. However, the court limited attendance at this deposition to outside counsel and ordered that Doe's identity be held in strict confidence by the attorneys. Although information disclosed by Doe, and Doe's identity, were to be designated "confidential—attorneys only" pursuant to the parties' stipulated protective order, the court gave counsel for ViroLogic leave to seek an ex parte order authorizing disclosure of this information to specified officers, employees, consultants or experts of ViroLogic.

After the deposition, counsel for ViroLogic filed an ex parte application for permission to disclose confidential information obtained from Doe, including his identity, to the company. Having learned from the deposition that Doe had worked for ViroLogic and continued to have ties with the company, the attorneys argued they needed to disclose this information to corporate officers in order to develop a prima facie case in opposition to Doe's special motion to strike. Before the Internet postings at issue, Doe worked for a brief period as a consultant for ViroLogic and, in this capacity, signed an agreement prohibiting disclosure of confidential and trade secret information. In addition, the attorneys discovered Doe held a substantial number of shares of ViroLogic stock and was closely related to a current ViroLogic employee. Counsel asserted it was "imperative" for them to consult with ViroLogic to learn more about Doe and his access to confidential information, either directly or through others, and about confidentiality agreements Doe may have signed. Specifically, counsel wished to explore with their client any information Doe may have discovered, through his contacts with the company, about the subject alluded to in his Yahoo messages of April 10 and April 11, 2002. Counsel also asserted a need for disclosure as part of "due diligence" in investigating whether Doe breached a confidentiality agreement with the company.

The trial court denied the ex parte application without oral argument but invited counsel for ViroLogic to renew the request in a regularly noticed motion. Counsel then

filed a noticed motion, along with an ex parte request for the motion to be heard three days later so that counsel would have time to consult with Virologic officers in preparing a response to Doe's special motion to strike. The court refused counsel's request for a hearing on such a shortened time frame, ordering instead that ViroLogic's motion to disclose Doe's identity would be heard on the same date as Doe's special motion to strike.

In opposing the special motion to strike, ViroLogic asserted Doe had not shown the case was brought as an improper SLAPP suit. ViroLogic also presented evidence to support claims that Doe was liable for misappropriation of trade secrets and unfair competition. ViroLogic pointed to the timing of certain of Doe's messages on the Yahoo board as circumstantial evidence he had obtained information about confidential business plans through improper means—presumably through his previous work or through his internal contact at the company. For the first time, ViroLogic also asserted Doe had misappropriated trade secret information by disclosing confidential revenue figures in a March 27, 2002 message on the Yahoo message board. ViroLogic claimed a revenue "snapshot" provided to Doe's internal contact just the day before (i.e., on March 26, 2002) described revenue figures very similar to those mentioned in Doe's message. Finally, ViroLogic suggested Doe's ownership of more than one hundred thousand shares of ViroLogic stock gave him a motive to manipulate the company's stock price by disclosing its trade secrets.

In response, Doe disputed the confidential nature of the information discussed in his messages, arguing his prediction about corporate revenues was based on public information and was wrong in any event, since ViroLogic ultimately announced much different figures, and his speculation about a potential business relationship was a common topic among investors. Doe also challenged ViroLogic's showing that it had suffered any injury as a result of the alleged disclosures.

C. The Trial Court's Rulings

A combined *in camera* hearing was held on the motion to disclose the identity of Doe and on the motion to strike on September 10, 2002. The trial court granted Doe's

special motion to strike, concluding that the causes of action arose from Doe's exercise of First Amendment rights in connection with public issues and ViroLogic had failed to show a probability of prevailing on its claims. Having made this ruling, and without hearing any specific argument on the issue, the trial court denied ViroLogic's motion to disclose Doe's identity. The court also denied Doe's outstanding motions (a motion to quash and demurrer) as moot and awarded Doe reasonable attorneys fees and costs in accordance with section 425.16, subdivision (c).

DISCUSSION

Section 425.16 provides for the early dismissal of certain unmeritorious claims by means of a special motion to strike. The filing of a special motion to strike under section 425.16 automatically stays all discovery in the case. However, "the court, on noticed motion and for good cause shown, may order that specified discovery be conducted" (§ 425.16, subd. (g).) Because anti-SLAPP motions are typically filed early in the proceedings, before the parties have had an opportunity to conduct much, or any, discovery, appellate courts have cautioned trial courts to protect the due process rights of plaintiffs responding to such motions by exercising their discretion under section 425.16, subdivision (g) liberally, and authorizing "reasonable and specified discovery timely petitioned for by a plaintiff . . ., when evidence to establish a prima facie case is reasonably shown to be held, or known, by defendant or its agents and employees." (*Lafayette Morehouse, Inc. v. Chronicle Publishing Co., supra*, 37 Cal.App.4th at p. 868; see also *Schroeder v. Irvine City Council* (2002) 97 Cal.App.4th 174, 190-191.)

We review a trial court order permitting or refusing discovery under section 425.16, subdivision (g) for abuse of discretion. (*Tuchscher Development Enterprises, Inc. v. San Diego Unified Port Dist.* (2003) 106 Cal.App.4th 1219, 1247; *Schroeder v. Irvine City Council, supra,* 97 Cal.App.4th at p. 191.) "'Under this standard the reviewing court will not disturb the trial court's decision unless it "has exceeded the limits of legal discretion by making an arbitrary, capricious, or patently absurd determination." [Citation.]" (*Tuchscher Development Enterprises, Inc. v. San Diego Unified Port Dist., supra,* at p. 1247.) A reasonable exercise of the trial court's discretion

under section 425.16, subdivision (g) does not violate the plaintiff's right to due process of law. (*Lafayette Morehouse, Inc. v. Chronicle Publishing Co., supra*, 37 Cal.App.4th at p. 868.) On the other hand, the plaintiff's due process rights are implicated by an arbitrary or capricious denial of discovery needed to oppose the special motion to strike. (See *id.* at pp. 867-868.)

ViroLogic's motion to discover Doe's identity unquestionably implicates Doe's right to anonymous speech. An author's decision to remain anonymous is an aspect of freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment. (*McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Comm'n* (1995) 514 U.S. 334, 342.) "The decision in favor of anonymity may be motivated by fear of economic or official retaliation, by concern about social ostracism, or merely by a desire to preserve as much of one's privacy as possible." (*Id.* at pp. 341-342.) Anonymous speech by persecuted groups has a long history in the political context. (*Id.* at p. 342) Or, "quite apart from any threat of persecution, an advocate may believe her ideas will be more persuasive if her readers are unaware of her identity. Anonymity thereby provides a way for a writer who may be personally unpopular to ensure that readers will not prejudge her message simply because they do not like its proponent." (*Ibid.*) Although the right to remain anonymous may be abused when anonymity is used to shield fraudulent conduct, the United States Supreme Court has remarked that, "in general, our society accords greater weight to the value of free speech than to the dangers of its misuse. [Citation.]" (*Id.* at p. 357.)

This is not a case involving anonymous speech by an unrelated third party, however. As was its right under section 425.16, subdivision (g), ViroLogic moved hastily to conduct discovery in support of its claims. The trial court found good cause for this discovery because it permitted the company's attorneys to take a half-day deposition of Doe. At this deposition, Virologic's outside counsel learned sufficient facts about Doe to alert them, and the trial court, that ViroLogic might reasonably assert claims against Doe and his inside contact not yet pleaded in the complaint. ViroLogic's attorneys put this information before the trial court in the motion to disclose Doe's identity to the company, arguing it would be a violation of due process to prohibit such communication.

We agree. By strictly following the trial court's order to avoid doing anything that might directly or indirectly alert their client of Doe's identity, ViroLogic's attorneys were unable even to prepare an adequate response to the motion to strike. Had they been able to disclose Doe's identity and investigate fully his relationship to the company, counsel may have been able to defend the motion successfully, or at least may have been able to amend the complaint to assert new claims

There are no California cases describing whether and under what circumstances a trial court should allow discovery into the identity of an anonymous Internet speaker accused of committing a wrongful or tortious act. We have found no California case addressing how a trial court should conduct this analysis when permitting discovery on an anti-SLAPP motion pursuant to section 425.16, subdivision (g). Nevertheless, it is clear that the competing constitutional interests of the plaintiff (in due process) and the defendant (in free speech and privacy) demand a balancing test. (See Columbia Ins. Co. v. seescandy.com (N.D.Cal. 1999) 185 F.R.D. 573, 578 [noting the needs of a party seeking redress of legal grievances "must be balanced against the legitimate and valuable right to participate in online forums anonymously or pseudonymously"]; *Immunomedics*, Inc. v. Doe (2001) 342 N.J.Super. 160, 162 [775 A.2d 773, 776] (Immunomedics) [in deciding whether to grant discovery regarding the identity of an anonymous user of an Internet message board, "courts must . . . strik[e] a balance between the First Amendment right of an individual to speak anonymously and the right of a company to protect its proprietary interest in the pursuit of claims based on actionable conduct . . . "].) Courts from other jurisdictions that have examined the competing interests of an anonymous Internet speaker and a party who claims harm from such speech have imposed the requirement of a threshold showing of the merits of the lawsuit before discovery of the identity of the poster would be ordered. (See, e.g., *Immunomedics*, *supra*, at pp. 776-777 [requiring plaintiff to produce evidence supporting a prima facie case against the speaker on each element of its claim].) No case, however, poses quite the combination of factors now before us.

Cases from other jurisdictions have required a plaintiff seeking discovery of an anonymous speaker's identity to show, at the very least, that it has a legitimate, good faith basis for believing the speaker committed actionable conduct against it and discovery of the speaker's identity is necessary for the plaintiff to pursue its claims. (See, e.g., Doe v. 2TheMart.com Inc. (W.D.Wash. 2001) 140 F.Supp.2d 1088, 1095.) There is an additional wrinkle in this case, in that section 425.16 subdivision (g) authorizes the trial court to permit discovery necessary to oppose an anti-SLAPP motion only upon a showing of good cause. None of the cases cited to us, nor discovered through our own research, involve a statute comparable to section 425.16. Given the plaintiff's need to gather and present admissible evidence at the early stage in litigation when an anti-SLAPP motion is typically heard, trial courts are also encouraged to exercise their discretion liberally by allowing discovery. (See Lafayette Morehouse, Inc. v. Chronicle Publishing Co., supra, 37 Cal. App. 4th at p. 868 ["The trial court . . . must liberally exercise its discretion by authorizing reasonable and specified discovery timely petitioned for by a plaintiff in a case such as this, when evidence to establish a prima facie case is reasonably shown to be held, or known, by defendant or its agents and employees"].)

In light of the competing constitutional considerations at issue, a trial court exercising its discretion to allow discovery for "good cause" under section 425.16, subdivision (g) must consider whether: (1) the plaintiff's claims describe actionable conduct by the defendant; and (2) discovery of the defendant's identity is necessary for the plaintiff to present evidence in opposition to the special motion to strike. Given the early stage when motions under section 425.16 are usually litigated, it is not appropriate to impose upon the plaintiff a burden of supporting its claims with evidence. (Contrast *Immunomedics*, *supra*, 775 A.2d at pp. 776-777.) That said, however, as part of its burden to show "good cause," the plaintiff should be able to explain why its claims are legitimate and how knowledge of the defendant's identity is essential in preparing a response to the section 425.16 motion. Taking these factors into consideration, we conclude the denial of ViroLogic's counsel's motion for disclosure of Doe's identity to corporate officers was an abuse of discretion.

Here, the trial court ruled first on the special motion to strike. Although the trial court concluded the claims in ViroLogic's amended complaint lacked minimal merit, and were subject to being stricken under section 425.16, the court's conclusion under the anti-SLAPP statute should not have been the beginning and end of the inquiry about whether disclosure of Doe's identity was appropriate. ViroLogic had demonstrated "good cause" to reveal Doe's identity to its outside counsel; the issue before the court at the time of the in camera hearing was whether due process compelled further disclosure to counsel's client in order to adequately defend against the motion to strike. A plaintiff's burden of showing "good cause" for discovery to respond to an anti-SLAPP motion must be something *less* than its burden in responding to the anti-SLAPP motion itself; otherwise motions to strike under section 425.16 raise serious due process concerns. (See Lafayette Morehouse, Inc. v. Chronicle Publishing Co., supra, 37 Cal.App.4th at pp. 867-868; see also Schroeder v. Irvine City Council, supra, 97 Cal.App.4th at pp. 190-191 [discovery stay of section 425.16, "if literally applied in all cases, could adversely affect a plaintiff's due process rights by placing the burden on the plaintiff to show a prima facie case without permitting the collection of evidence needed to satisfy that burden . . . "].)

Moreover, even if the trial court ruled correctly on the claims before it in the amended complaint that these claims failed to describe actionable conduct by Doe, ViroLogic's counsel had set forth sufficient details in the motion to disclose Doe's identity to alert the trial court that other claims were contemplated that needed investigation. The court abused its discretion in denying ViroLogic's motion for disclosure because the motion presented sufficient grounds for the company potentially to bring breach of duty and contract claims against Doe beyond those pleaded in the amended complaint. ViroLogic's attorneys learned for the first time at Doe's deposition that Doe previously worked for ViroLogic and, in this capacity, had signed a confidentiality agreement. ViroLogic's attorneys also learned Doe had a close relationship with a current ViroLogic employee, who had also signed a confidentiality agreement with the company. With respect to ViroLogic's trade secret claim based on alleged disclosure of confidential revenue information, the company's attorneys

presented evidence showing Doe's internal contact was one of only a handful of employees who had access to this information, and the contact received one such revenue report only a day before Doe posted a message predicting a shortfall in revenues. ViroLogic also presented circumstantial evidence that Doe had access to and disclosed confidential information regarding the company's business plans, because he posted messages regarding such plans just a day after ViroLogic's CEO may have communicated with a potential business partner. ViroLogic's counsel, strictly following the "attorneys only" order, was prevented from even discussing these matters with its client before the hearing on the motions. Counsel was put at irreconcilable odds with its client's interests in the litigation.

The trial court may well have concluded that none of the information at issue rose to the level of a trade secret, as alleged in the amended complaint. However, the evidence presented in ViroLogic's counsel's motion provides a good faith basis to believe the company may have had some other legally valid claim against Doe for disclosure of confidential information. Once ViroLogic's attorneys learned Doe was a former employee who had signed a confidentiality agreement, they should have been permitted to discuss these facts with their client. In addition to potentially bolstering their evidence in response to the motion to strike, the attorneys could have explored with ViroLogic the possibility of amending the complaint against Doe to allege, for example, a breach of contract claim, as stated in the written argument in support of the motion to disclose Doe's identity. By granting the motion to strike and entering a judgment on the lawsuit without allowing counsel to confer with their client, the trial court completely foreclosed ViroLogic's ability to consider and pursue such a potentially meritorious claim. This was a violation of due process.

Our decision on this issue should not be seen as a reflection on the merits of ViroLogic's present claims or any claims the company may decide to bring against Doe or anyone else in the future. We have concluded only that the evidence ViroLogic presented in support of its motion for disclosure was sufficient to support a good faith belief that Doe had engaged in actionable conduct against the company, although perhaps

beyond what had previously been alleged. In addition, it was reasonably necessary for counsel to share Doe's identity with ViroLogic to gather evidence in support of the company's present claims and to investigate the possibility of pursuing new claims against Doe on the company's behalf.

We recognize that ViroLogic did not challenge the trial court's initial order allowing counsel to depose Doe but designating his deposition "Confidential—Attorneys Only" under the parties' stipulated protective order. While this order may have initially struck an appropriate balance between the parties' competing interests in discovery and confidentiality (see *Seattle Times Co. v. Rhinehart* (1984) 467 U.S. 20, 35-36), the balance shifted in favor of disclosure after ViroLogic's attorneys learned crucial facts at the deposition about Doe's relationship with the company. Under these circumstances, fundamental fairness required that ViroLogic's counsel be permitted to share this information with their client. (Cf. *Fox Searchlight Pictures, Inc. v. Paladino* (2001) 89 Cal.App.4th 294, 316 [fundamental fairness required disclosure of sealed evidence plaintiff submitted in opposition to anti-SLAPP motion]; but see *Brown Bag Software v. Symantec Corp.* (9th Cir. 1992) 960 F.2d 1465, 1470-1471 [affirming "attorneys' eyes only" order as necessary to prevent a party from learning trade secrets of its competitor].)

Finally, as a procedural matter, we address the timing of the hearing on ViroLogic's discovery motion. The trial court denied ViroLogic's motion to disclose Doe's identity immediately after the court granted Doe's section 425.16 motion to strike. But, because a plaintiff's burden in seeking to discover the identity of an anonymous defendant is not coextensive with its burden in defeating an anti-SLAPP motion, a court faced with both such motions should generally decide the discovery motion *first*. If the motion is granted, the plaintiff may then be allowed sufficient time to complete discovery before responding to the anti-SLAPP motion. (See *Lafayette Morehouse, Inc. v. Chronicle Publishing Co., supra*, 37 Cal.App.4th at p. 868)

DISPOSITION

The judgment and cost award are reversed, and the order granting Doe's special motion to strike under section 425.16 is vacated. On remand, the trial court is directed to

enter an order permitting disclosure of Doe's identity to appropriate corporate officers of ViroLogic; however, in so doing, the court shall retain discretion to enter appropriate protective orders to limit dissemination of this information and safeguard Doe's privacy. The trial court may then entertain any further motions precipitated by such disclosure.

Each side shall bear its own costs on appeal.

	Parrilli, J.
We concur:	
McGuiness, P. J.	
Corrigan, J.	